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Problematic stuff: death, memory and the reinterpretation of cached objects

Dr Lindsey Büster, University of York
Department of Archaeology, University of York, King's Manor, Exhibition Square, York, YO1 7EP
lindsey.buster@york.ac.uk

Abstract

Deliberately deposited (or 'cached') objects are ubiquitous in the archaeological record, yet they are often classified under different categories (hoards, structured deposits, grave goods, cenotaph burials etc.) and interpreted according to different criteria. Drawing on contemporary attitudes to death, dying and bereavement, and using later prehistoric Britain as a case study, these objects will be brought together within a single interpretative framework which asserts that much of this material represents the 'problematic stuff' left behind by the dead.

Introduction

Various names are given to deliberately deposited objects in the archaeological record: hoards, structured deposits, grave goods etc. Hoards (often comprising metal objects) are usually defined on the basis of their isolated context and the perceived quality or quantity of their contents (e.g. Bradley *et al.* 2013: 209), and are traditionally given over to finds specialists; grave goods are typically those items which accompany a dead body (inhumed or cremated) and lie within the realm of funerary archaeology; whilst 'structured deposition' is a catch-all term given to cached objects outwith these former categories, often found in settlement contexts (e.g. in pits, ditches and buildings; cf. Hill 1995). Though these objects are acknowledged as the residue of ritual activity, the nature of this behaviour is understood to be distinct in each case. The high material value of hoards sees them interpreted as deposited either for safe keeping or, more often, as propitiatory offerings (Bradley 1996: 305), while our tendency to place the human body centre stage relegates grave goods to the role of *accompanying* the dead, either for use in the afterlife or as dedications by mourners during the funeral (e.g. Parker Pearson 1999: 7). Structured deposits—by nature a generic category—have been interpreted in more varied and less specific ways (see Garrow 2012 for a useful overview), and the use of additional terms (deliberate, formal, placed, ritual,

selected, special, token etc.; see Brudenell & Cooper 2008: 15–16) to highlight differences in composition and depositional context has added yet more categories.

The differential classification of assemblages which include significant overlapping characteristics has created unhelpful divisions. Structured deposits which include disarticulated fragments of human bone, but which are found on settlements, for example, fall outside the focus of mainstream funerary archaeology, while groups of 'bodiless objects' within cemeteries are frequently categorised as 'cenotaphs' (e.g. Nilsson Stutz & Tarlow 2013: 6), in recognition of their likely mortuary associations. Such distinctions have served to elevate the presence of the physical remains of the human body over other types of material and have limited the scope of our interpretations (Brudenell & Cooper 2008: 25–9). With this in mind, I will discuss these various classes of assemblage under the umbrella term 'cached object' (see Archaeological Institute of America 2020).

Using later prehistoric Britain as a case study (where burial of the dead in formal cemeteries is relatively rare), and by illustrating how even the most mundane of objects can take on powerful emotional significance, I will use contemporary theories of death, dying and bereavement to suggest that cached objects frequently represent the careful deposition of 'problematic stuff' left behind by the dead. This recognition is not intended to identify new types of deposit, nor necessarily to replace existing interpretations, but to unite previously divided materials under a common interpretative lens and to demonstrate that 'emotional value' is a legitimate consideration in our understanding of cached objects in the archaeological record.

Structured deposition in later prehistoric Britain

In contrast to the monumental ritual landscapes of the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, the archaeological record of later prehistoric Britain—that is, the Late Bronze and Iron Ages—is predominantly 'domestic' in character (Brück 1995: 245). With rare regional exceptions (e.g. the Arras Culture in East Yorkshire and the Aylesford-Swarling Culture in south-east England; Stead 1991; Fitzpatrick 2007), much of later prehistoric Britain lacks a visible normative burial rite and dedicated funerary monuments (cf. Harding 2016). Human remains are elusive, there are few formal cemeteries, and (if recovered at all) bones are usually isolated and frequently deposited in settlement contexts. Indeed, it seems likely that the

majority of the dead were excarnated—defleshed and disarticulated by natural or artificial means (Carr & Knüsel 1997)—rather than interred in graves. At this time, settlements become the focus of ritual activity, and much of what we excavate on such sites likely represents selective deposition, rather than the product of casual loss and discard (e.g. Hill 1995; Bradley 2005: 33, 208–9).

This selectivity is indicated by the peculiar distributions of artefacts on later prehistoric settlements, and the frequent occurrence of 'structured deposits': a short-hand term for caches of objects and animal bones (and occasionally human remains; Brück 1995; Armit 2018) that have been carefully selected and deposited in specific places (e.g. in ditch terminals, roundhouse entrance postholes, pits) at specific times. The term was originally coined in reference to an apparent patterning in the deposition of objects (pottery, bone, flint) at Neolithic ritual monuments (Richards & Thomas 1984) but has since been adopted to describe a variety of cached objects on domestic sites (e.g. Hill 1995).

A typical example of such a deposit is represented by the fleshed head (cranium and beak) of a great auk, articulated cattle vertebrae and a complete pottery vessel (possibly with its contents) deposited behind the wall of a wheelhouse at Cnip on Lewis (Scotland), during its construction some time in the third century BC (Armit 2006: 198, 220–1). In this instance, this 'foundation deposit' presumably served a propitiatory role in dedication of the new building and its inhabitants; Webley's (2007) study of Late Bronze Age roundhouses in southern England demonstrates that similar deposits were also made at the end of a building's life. Roundhouse floors appear to have been meticulously swept clean of daily debris, providing further evidence that certain objects were deliberately left behind. At the Late Iron Age settlement at Broxmouth in south-east Scotland, dished floor profiles and the undercutting of inner wall faces attest to the erosion caused by frequent sweeping out (Büster & Armit 2013; Fig. 1); a process that appears to have prompted the subsequent laying of paved surfaces.

Unfortunately, identifying structured deposits as proxies for ritual behaviour is often where the interpretative process ends, and brings us no closer to understanding the motives behind the deposition of this material. Considering these assemblages within a broader spectrum of cached objects and recognising our *own* emotional attachment to 'things' (e.g. Bell & Spikins 2018) may, however, help us move forward.

Problematic stuff: reassessing the mundane

'Continuing bonds' theory was developed in modern bereavement studies (e.g. Klass *et al.* 1996; Walter 1996; Stroebe *et al.* 2012) and grew out of dissatisfaction with common perceptions of the nature of grief. Traditional approaches emphasised the need for detachment (Freud 1917[1957]), or asserted that the grieving process progressed through a unilinear series of stages towards the restoration of a pre-bereavement status quo (Kubler-Ross 1969; Bowlby 1973, 1980; Worden 1991). Grief is, however, far more complex than a linear trajectory of 'recovery', and (consciously or unconsciously) individuals often form 'continuing bonds' with the dead: new kinds of relationships which endure to a greater or lesser extent throughout their lives (Shuchter & Zisook 1993: 34; see Croucher 2017 for the application of continuing bonds theory in an archaeological context).

A recent study exploring the applicability of archaeology in discussions of death, dying and bereavement with healthcare professionals (Büster *et al*. 2018; Croucher *et al.* in press), revealed that objects are central to the maintenance of 'continuing bonds'.

> *'…my mum died very suddenly when I was 25… and just before she died, she'd bought a big tub of Horlicks which she gave to me for some reason, because she bought two on offer or something, and I could not throw this away. It was in the cupboard for five years! And it was solid. But because she'd bought it, it became like an artefact… I did throw it away in the end, I suppose it was a symbol of my getting through the grief'*

The jar of Horlicks—a mass-produced and inexpensive item, acquired by the deceased only days before their death as part of a routine shopping trip—was transformed through the act (and timing) of 'gift-giving' into an emotionally-charged 'artefact': the material embodiment of the last physical interaction between two living individuals. Though the bereaved person did not like Horlicks—perhaps it would not have felt appropriate to consume the contents in any case—they could not throw this 'artefact' out with the rubbish. This was no longer *just* a jar of Horlicks: it had been transformed into something deeply *problematic.*

The same sentiments are echoed in the words of J. Brammer (2017), writing about the difficult task of clearing out her late mother's house:

> *'So, when is a doily not a doily? When it goes from being one of my mother's kitsch furniture accessories when she was alive, into a sacred reminder of her homeliness now that she's gone… The significance of the doilies and anything she had touched, grew overnight… I decided to honour her by framing and hanging them so her story could be woven into the walls of my home'*

Again, we see previously old-fashioned and 'unnecessary' ephemera taking on new meanings and problematic status overnight: not because of their material or aesthetic value, but because of their mnemonic power. If we accept the possibility for emotional attachment to even the most mundane objects, then, as Brudenell and Cooper (2008: 24) point out, '… *any* attempt to define rigid criteria for identifying 'special' deposits may ultimately miss the point'.

Towards an emotional archaeology of the mundane

There are many examples of attempts to maintain continuing bonds with the dead in the archaeological record, not least in the erection of large funerary monuments that served as mnemonic devices for the living as they went about their everyday lives. Equally visible (particularly as structured deposits), but perhaps as yet unrecognised, is the disposal of the problematic stuff that bound the living and the dead together: material too entwined with the social identity of the dead to be reused in the world of the living, yet too symbolically-charged for casual discard as part of normal processes of waste management (e.g. throwing out with the refuse of everyday life).

The *material* value of certain artefacts—due to cultural preference for particular raw materials, the time and skill taken to make them, or their rare and exotic nature—has long been recognised: it is this criterion that often comes to the fore in our understanding and categorisation of 'hoards'. Increasingly, materiality (e.g. Meskell 2005) and biographical (e.g. Gosden & Marshall 1999; Joy 2009) approaches to the study of artefacts have also championed the *symbolic* value that certain objects may have possessed, as material manifestations of distant lands, the product of technological transformations, or their embodiment of other (intangible) properties: interpretations of this nature often play out in our understandings of grave goods. But recognition of problematic stuff as a legitimate and powerful response to even the most mundane objects dictates that we include another

important value category in our discussion and interpretation: that of *emotion* (Fig. 2). It is through this lens that we might better understand the ritual behaviours that led to the creation of cached objects in the archaeological record. Of course, it is not necessarily the case that any object chosen for (or warranting) deposition in a controlled and structured way embodies just one value category, and indeed, once such artefacts are brought together, these assemblages will themselves take on new meanings. But it is important to recognise the raw emotional power that everyday objects can acquire at certain times and places.

Problematising structured deposits: the invisible 'graves' of Iron Age Britain?

In the few areas of Iron Age Britain where a normative visible burial rite exists, bodies are often associated with artefacts ('grave goods'). The inhumations and chariot burials of the Arras Culture of East Yorkshire, for example, contain some of the most spectacular objects known from the period, including brooches with enamel and coral inlay, and elaborate necklaces of glass and amber (Giles 2012). Many of these items presumably belonged to the deceased, or were sufficiently entwined with their social identity to necessitate removal from circulation upon their death. Yet, it is not just those items worn *on* the body that can take on problematic status. We must also consider other categories of artefact (Fig. 3). Objects also become problematic through their association *with* the dead body through, for example, their use in post-mortem care and mortuary rites. The toilet instruments (tweezers, nail cleaners, ear scoops etc.) found in graves at Mill Hill (Deal), King Harry Lane and Biddenham Loop in southern England, and at Arras and Wetwang Slack in East Yorkshire (Harding 2016: 179–80), as well as in later prehistoric graves on the Continent (Fontijn 2002: 200–1), may well represent such items. Significantly, these objects have also been recovered from structured deposits in regions in which graves are absent; the nail cleaner built into the wall of 'Hut II' at Hownam Rings in the Scottish Borders (Piggott 1947: 211) represents one such example. Then come items *owned* by the deceased: objects such as those represented in the modern-day quotations above. Analogies for these different categories of object have precedence elsewhere; in the Medieval Christian church, for example, relics could comprise the physical remains of a saint's body (first class), objects owned or used by a saint (second class), or objects that had touched a first- or second-class relic (third-class) (Jestice 2004: 887).

We might also add an additional tier of problematic stuff: the artefacts left behind by the past lives of those still living, i.e. previous social states transcended through certain rites of

passage, or objects which represent 'the paraphernalia of a specific kind of personhood' (Fontijn 2002: 217). In a modern context this might manifest itself in the inability of parents, for example, to dispose of the infant clothes of grown-up children, or the retention by adults of teenage clothes that no longer fit or cassette tapes which can no longer be played. A recent exchange on social media by individuals sorting through their toddler's old baby clothes prompted one mother to lament that 'I have a bag for charity and a bag called "I'm not ready to let go yet"'. In the archaeological record such phenomena will be hard to recognise but they might be glimpsed, for example, in the inclusion of worn-out objects or miniatures in (adult) graves. Miniature items, such as the shield from Langley, Oxfordshire, are often interpreted as 'votives' (e.g. Green 1987). But with a different interpretative lens, there is no reason why objects such as the diminutive sword in wooden scabbard in the grave of two adults at the Roman cemetery of Cranmer House, Canterbury (Bennett 1987: 66) need not represent a cherished childhood toy. Problematic stuff might also be evidenced by the inclusion of adult-sized objects in children's graves; that is, objects—such as the three copper rings interred with a child at Barrow Hills in Oxfordshire (Brück 2004: 314)—that were destined for individuals who did not live long enough to wear them.

In regions and periods with mortuary traditions which involved the digging of graves, the disposal of problematic stuff would potentially have been fairly straightforward, since it could have accompanied the deposition of the body (or its remnants). But what happened to these objects when there was no grave in which to deposit it? What happened to problematic stuff in the communities of later prehistoric Britain, for example, whose predominant mode of disposal of the dead involved the complete dispersal of the body through excarnation?

Human remains are themselves sometimes incorporated into structured deposits; the femur interred with a weaving comb and copper alloy fibula in a pit at Maiden Castle, Dorset (Sharples 2010: 239) is just one example. These surely represent 'token' remnants of the deceased collected from the scattered remains of bodies defleshed and disarticulated through excarnation; a phenomenon which McKinley (2013: 154) similarly argues for cremation graves of this period. With this in mind, it is perhaps no surprise that a downturn in the construction of barrows (and the associated interment of bodies and their grave goods) across much of Europe after 1500 BC coincides with an increase in the deposition of weapon hoards; frequently associated with isolated human bones (Bradley 1996: 306) and placed in watery contexts (Barrett & Needham 1998; Fitzpatrick 1984). Conversely, the emergence of

large Urnfield (flat grave) cemeteries across continental Europe in the Late Bronze Age coincides with a *downturn* in the deposition of objects in rivers (Fontijn 2002: 234). Returning to the invisible mortuary rites of Iron Age Britain, then, it is likewise no surprise that torcs (neck rings)—which are prominent in burials from the Middle East to eastern France (Eluère 1987: 23–4), and which feature in some of the best-known Continental funerary assemblages of the period (e.g. Glauberg, Vix, Reinheim etc.; Bartel *et al.* 1998; Brun & Chaume 1997; Echt 1999)—are a frequent component of hoards (Snettisham in Suffolk being perhaps the best-known example; Joy & Farley in press). The deposition of socially-charged items in non-mortuary contexts was likely accompanied by similar performances and rituals to those practised at funerals (i.e. events which included the deposition of dead bodies) at other times and in other places. As such, variations in patterns of deposition may have less to do with fundamental changes in the perception or expression of social identity, and more to do with changes in contemporary modes of disposal of the dead.

The house as memory box

Broxmouth, in south-east Scotland, was a long-lived hillfort settlement, occupied (apparently continuously) for around 800 years between c. 640 BC and AD 210 (Armit & McKenzie 2013: xv). The site was variously enclosed and unenclosed, expanded and contracted, over the six phases of its use, which culminated in a settlement (c. 100 cal. BC – cal. AD 155) of densely packed roundhouses constructed of timber and stone, many of which saw repeated refurbishment on the same house-stance (Büster & Armit 2013). Despite the structural stability of the existing fabric, new walls and paved floors were periodically inserted, encasing households in increasing layers of stone. Upon construction of each successive phase of the roundhouse, single artefacts or small caches of objects were carefully placed between wall skins and under floors. As we have seen (Fig. 1), floor erosion points to the continual sweeping out of the roundhouses of daily debris, suggesting that these objects were deliberately deposited.

One roundhouse in particular, House 4, displayed at least five stages of modification (Figs. 1 & 4)—apparently on a generational or bi-generational basis—with *transitional* deposits placed into the fabric of the structure during each modification (Büster in press). Certain of the objects appear to reference one another, despite being deposited over several generations.

Single bone spoons were, for example, placed beneath the walls of the first and last iterations of the roundhouse, five or more generations apart, and quernstones (one deliberately defaced and most placed with their grinding faces downwards) appear repeatedly to have been incorporated into the paved floors.

These structured deposits comprised objects that were not of high material value. They were everyday items but would have been intimately tied to the social identity of certain individuals. Some objects may well have been owned by the deceased, but communal or household items may also have taken on mnemonic associations with specific people though routine use. Quernstones, for example, would have been painful reminders of previous lives lived: the heavy use-wear and surface abrasion testament to days, months and years of a daily grind that transformed human bodies as well as the stones themselves. This mnemonic power was, like J. Brammer's doilies, 'woven' into the fabric of House 4.

At Broxmouth, as elsewhere, it is important to remember that it is not the use but the *discard* of objects that we observe in the archaeological record: discard which appears to represent an attempt at appropriate disposal of these powerful and problematic items, perhaps after long periods of retention.

> *'…my granddad… he had this pair of shoes… it was one of the items of clothing that I remember him wearing. These dreadful misshapen shoes. And I couldn't throw those away. Then one day they were sitting in my bedroom and it's as if I could hear his voice in my head saying 'what are you doing keeping those? Do you think that's how I want you to remember me? Get rid of them!', so I got rid of them. But it was like I think you have to hold onto things until it's time to release them.'*

A set of gaming pieces (Fig. 5) deposited in House 4 represents perhaps the most overt example at Broxmouth of this tension between curation and deposition: one having been incorporated into the infill of a pit, and another two deposited (with a human cranial fragment) at the base of a newly-constructed wall at least two generations later (Büster & Armit 2013: 138–51). The latter surely represent the careful and deliberate 'disposal' of objects which had served as visual cues in stories and oral traditions associated with the past occupants of House 4 (Büster in press) but were now no longer required (or desired) in the world of the living.

Problematic stuff: grave goods for the elusive dead

By drawing on contemporary attitudes to death, dying and bereavement, I have examined the relationship between people and objects, and between the living and the dead, in a way which transcends traditional narratives of power, status and wealth. Through the lived experiences of bereaved individuals today, I have demonstrated the emotional power that even the most mundane of objects can acquire at certain times and in certain places, and that this transformation from everyday to problematic is *ad hoc* and unpredictable; like the jar of Horlicks, it need not conform to any deep-rooted or widely shared cultural understanding of particular classes of artefact. As such, we must recognise that by focusing on valuable, exotic and rare objects, or certain object types, we have created biases in our recognition and interpretation of cached objects in the archaeological record.

In the context of later prehistoric Britain (and in other times and places where 'grave-less' mortuary rites predominate), this has far-reaching implications for the interpretation of artefacts deposited outside of formal 'funerary' settings. By considering groups of cached 'bodiless' objects (e.g. structured deposits and hoards) from the perspective of problematic stuff, the false dichotomies created by traditional categorisations of this material become clear. In addition, the experiences of bereaved individuals reveal a tension between the retention of objects in the maintenance of continuing bonds with the dead and their eventual 'disposal' after varying periods of curation, perhaps long after the deposition and/or disintegration of the physical remains of the dead. A more integrated approach to the interpretation of cached objects—one which does not fetishize the human body over other types of material—is necessary.

The recognition of 'problematic stuff' allows us to reconceptualise cached objects in non-funerary contexts as the 'safe' and culturally-appropriate disposal of symbolically-charged material which is neither appropriate for continued circulation in the world of the living, nor disposal in the context of everyday waste management. This phenomenon has implications not only for our understanding of the structured deposits of later prehistoric Britain, but for the interpretation and reassessment of whole categories of material culture which have been overlooked for their 'mundane' nature and non-funerary contexts of deposition. It has also shed new light on the potential of emotional perspectives to be usefully harnessed in gaining

deeper and more meaningful understandings of the behaviours driving the formation of the archaeological record, and into the minds of individuals that were, in some ways, not so different from our own.

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Figure captions

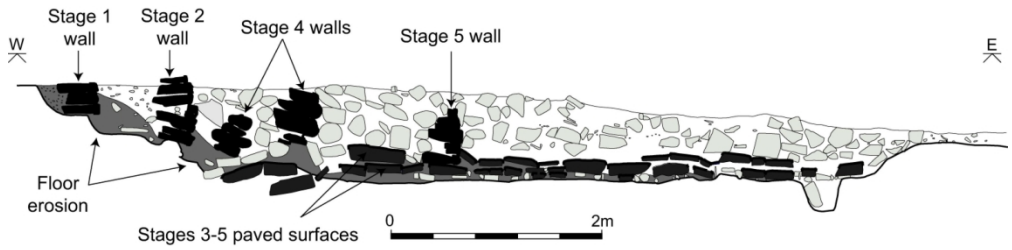
Fig. 1 Section through House 4 at Broxmouth, south-east Scotland, showing dished floor profile and undercutting of the drystone walls which were built one inside the other over five consecutive stages of remodelling. Paved floor surfaces were constructed one on top of the other from stage 3 onwards.

Fig. 2 Types of value which may have been attributed to objects chosen for structured deposition

Fig. 3 Ways in which objects might gain problematic status

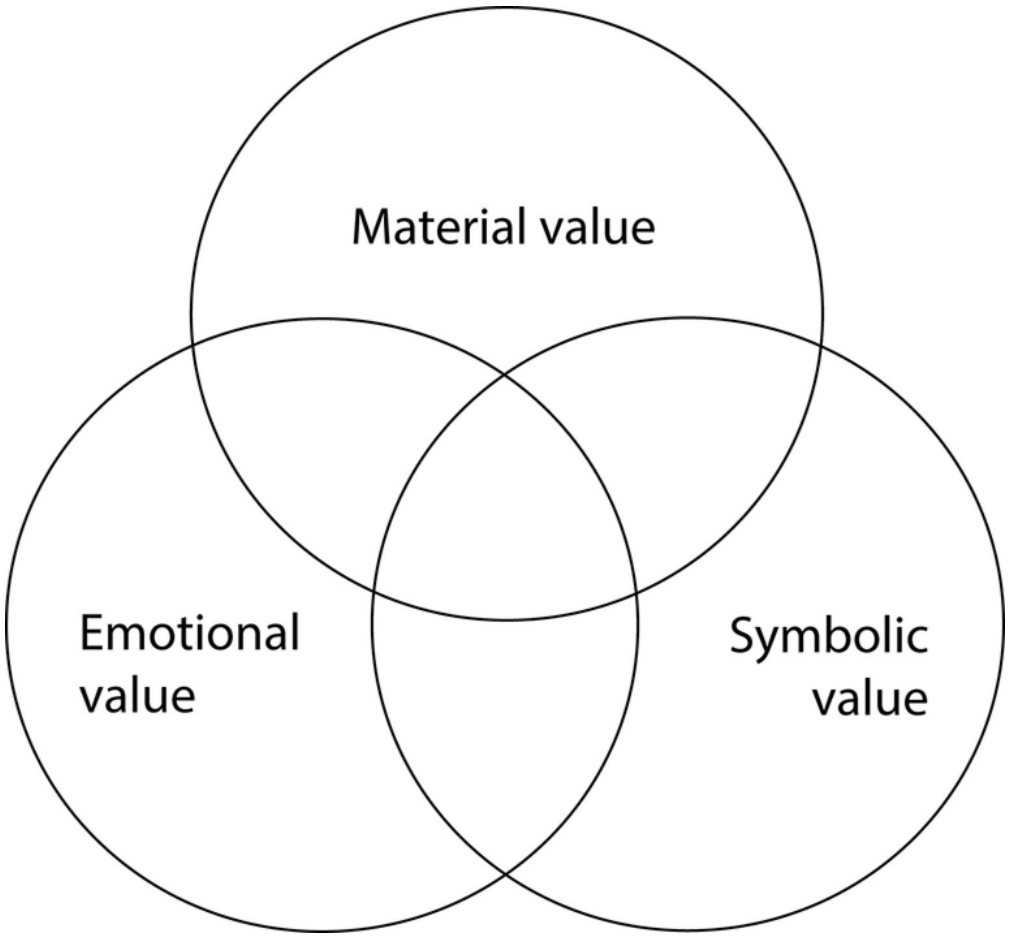
Fig. 4 House 4 at Broxmouth, which saw periodic modification on the same house-stance, but whose inhabitants retained the defunct fabric of previous iterations of the structure (visible here as multiple concentric arcs of walling)

Fig. 5 Polished antler gaming pieces deliberately deposited in the fabric of House 4 at Broxmouth



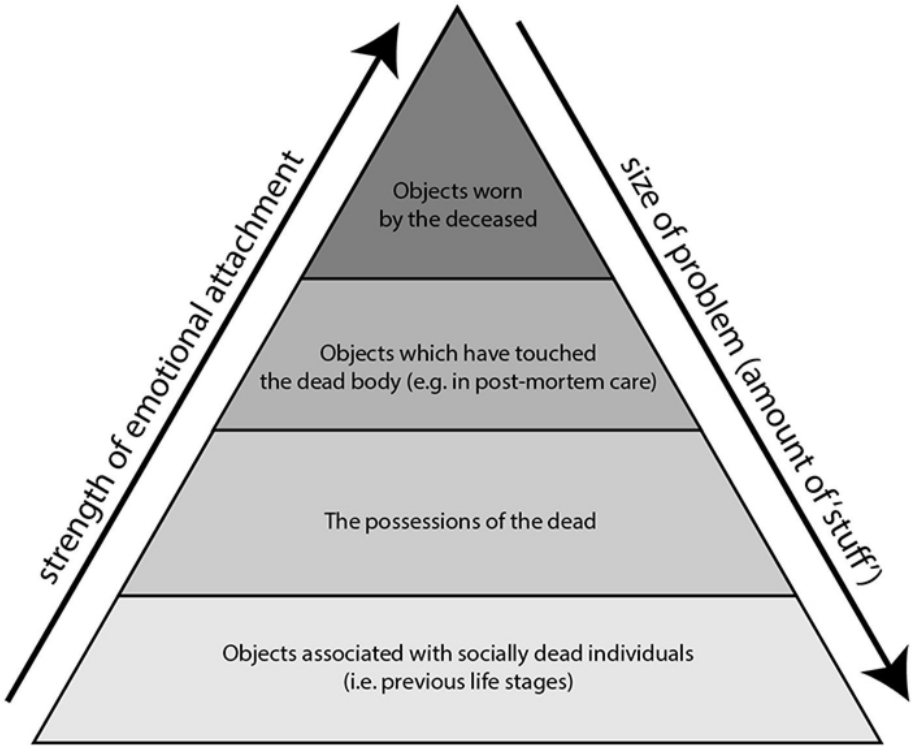
Section through House 4 at Broxmouth, south-east Scotland, showing dished floor profile and undercutting of the drystone walls which were built one inside the other over five consecutive stages of remodelling. Paved floor surfaces were constructed one on top of the other from stage 3 onwards.

134x32mm (300 x 300 DPI)



Types of value which may have been attributed to objects chosen for structured deposition

65x60mm (300 x 300 DPI)

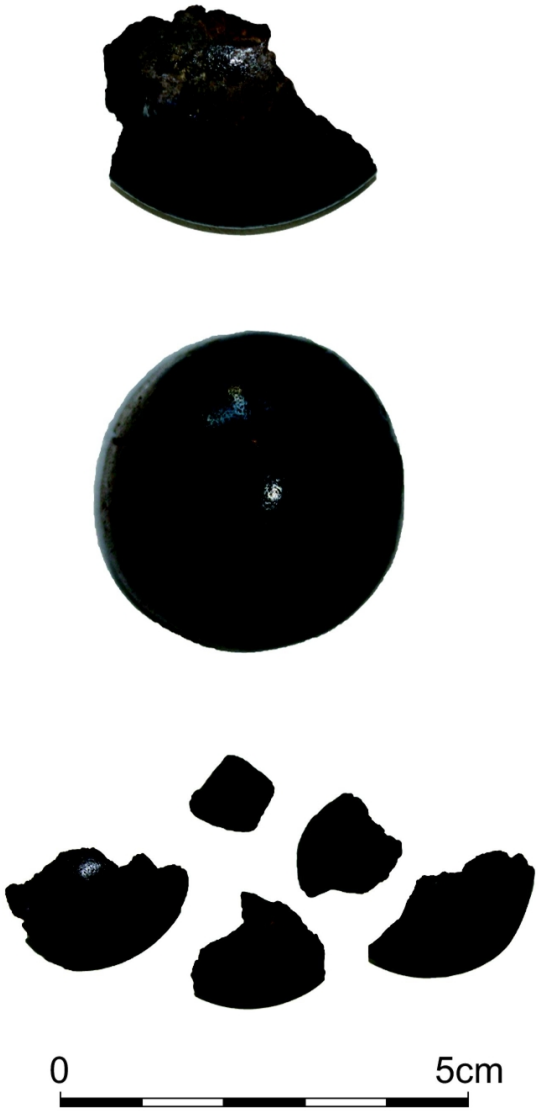


Ways in which objects might gain problematic status

65x51mm (300 x 300 DPI)

House 4 at Broxmouth, which saw periodic modification on the same house-stance, but whose inhabitants retained the defunct fabric of previous iterations of the structure (visible here as multiple concentric arcs of walling)

65x43mm (300 x 300 DPI)



Polished antler gaming pieces deliberately deposited in the fabric of House 4 at Broxmouth

65x120mm (300 x 300 DPI)